
Book Review: Alina Polyakova – The Dark Side of European Integration. Social Foundation and Cultural Determinants of the Rise of Radical Right Movements in Contemporary Europe

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I. Introduction

In her book “the Dark Side of European Integration”, Alina Polyakova establishes the assumption that social integration has not followed economic integration in the European project. Her research interest is, to find out whether and in which ways nationalism in its ethnic form constitutes a countermovement to the European project, an assessment which she bases on the increasing successes of radical right parties and movements all over Europe. Within the increasing success of radical right parties and movements she chooses 3 main contexts for closer analysis, examining different aspects of her broader research topic. The contexts she chooses are the factors for the electoral support of radical right parties, the individual motivations of people to join these parties or movements and in the last chapter a theoretical discussion of social movement research and the interconnections of social movements and political parties. In the 3 main parts of the book the author uses different methodological approaches; while the first part is a quantitative analysis with a Tobit regression, the second part is a qualitative research of interviews with activists and the last chapter is a discussion on a theoretical level. Also, Polyakova first refers to a set of countries, while turning to a single country in her second analysis and staying on a theoretical level in the third part of the book.

Overall, the book provides an interesting approach to the topic and brings up new points of view and suggestions as well as new justification contexts and interconnections within the

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topic, which are very interesting for researches focusing on the far right. However, the chapters are not interconnected but refer to completely different aspects of the research question, which would at least require a stronger conclusion justifying the assembly of these 3 different chapters in one book. Also, the overall frame in which the research is located is not totally clear, as Polyakova speaks about the European integration which concerns mostly the EU but subsequently also bases her research on countries which do not belong to the EU. Though she argues that European integration affects the European continent over the borders of the European Union, she does not conceptualize the terms and does not establish a comprehensive framework for the research.

II. Summary of Key Arguments

The author bases her thesis and research on the assumption, that the cultural integration, which was supposed to follow economic and political integration within Europe, did not appear and that there are nationalist streams, evidenced by radical right wing parties and movements. Her main research topic is, if these movements can be assessed as countermovements to the European integration, as they “advocate for everything that the European Union claims it does not” (14). Nationalism in its ethnic form constitutes the basic concept the author analyses, especially how it establishes as support for radical right parties and as a process of political motivation. Polyakova’s aim is to trace “discernable facets of nationalist resistance and [to reveal] the macro and micro processes of their development“(24).

The author divides her book into 3 parts, which she refers to as “each is written as a stand-alone piece” (24). In fact, the chapters are linked very weakly, according to Polyakova, “the paradox uniting all the chapters is the seeming contradiction between Europe’s EU project of cultural integration and the continued salience and perseverance of nationalism” (14). She however hardly discusses this contradiction but solely focuses on nationalism as such, which substantially weakens the links between the chapters. Additionally, there are no methodological connections between the single researches, they are each based on a completely independent and also completely different methodology.

Polyakova starts her first research chapter with an analysis of factors that contribute to the electoral successes of radical right parties. She includes member states of the EU as well as non-members into her research and refers in her hypotheses to the following independent

variables: effects of unemployment, economic decline, number of immigrants, electoral systems and stability of electoral systems. Polyakova adds new components to already existing studies by taking an extraordinary long time span into account (1990-2012), by including also elections and countries with no radical right parties (zero observations; p. 47) and by explicitly comparing the developments in Eastern and Western Europe. Methodologically she conducts a Tobit regression, in which the percentage of the popular vote received by the radical right parties in parliamentary elections forms the dependent variable (49). One of her main findings is, that economic decline does not significantly affect the vote share of radical right parties, while immigration and political instability do. Further, the electoral support for radical right parties in Eastern Europe is based on a different set of factors than in Western Europe, confirming that the political stability, which she associates with the trust of the people towards their government, is more influential in Eastern Europe than in the Western parts (64).

In her second research chapter Polyakova introduces a qualitative research which she conducted in the Ukraine. It consisted of 111 in-depth interviews with activists and members of the radical right party Freedom (Svoboda) from Ukraine as well as different kinds of experts, which were conducted between 2009 and 2012 (79). The interviews were carried out in 3 different cities in the Ukraine, which represent different levels of popular support for Freedom (82). The research interest of the author was, to find out more about the mobilization strategies of Freedom, as well as about individual motivations of activists that made them join a radical party. Polyakova does not present any systematic analysis of her data but discusses her results on the basis of segments of the interviews and her own, personal assessment. She found out, that mobilization often occurs through the social connections of individuals, who are at first not particularly interested in a certain ideology but get involved through their friends and radicalize in the later course of their activism (102).

The last research chapter of the book is dedicated to the research on social movements and political parties. Polyakova first provides an overview on the development of movement research since the 1950's, depicting how the academic notions on the development of movements changed. It began with structural-functionalist theories, arguing that social movements develop when the balance between social structure and moral norms is disturbed by rapid modernization (109). Later, the mobilization theories followed, which argued that

movements emerge through a redistribution of resources to challengers as a consequence of social change (113). Since the 1990's, scholars increasingly focused on processes of mobilization, turning to collective action frames and contentious politics (117-119). In the following, Polyakova discusses movement research in the present, arguing that the separate research of political parties and social movement is an artificial separation, which is not contemporary any more. Boundaries between social movements and political parties are fluent and a lot of interconnections exist between them. With reference to the field theory, she suggests a new model, which takes the openness of a state towards the challengers defined and the structure of the political field into account (140).

In her final conclusion, Polyakova concludes that her basic research question, whether increasing nationalism can be accessed as a countermovement against the European Union, “remains still largely unanswerable, as it is simply too early” (153) and that time will tell. She discusses the relationship between liberal politics and liberal economics, assessing the developments she described as “unintended consequences of a deeply-embedded logic that assumes a mutual dependency between economic and cultural integration”. She assesses this particular logic as having exposed the conflict between economic and social contemporary Europe (155). She concludes by referring to the economic crisis that hit the EU since 2007 and drawing 2 possible scenarios, which are increasing emphasis on nationality or, as intended by the EU, a closer union and integration.

III. Critique

Overall, the book is composed of 2 well described and founded researches and a theoretical discussion, which each brings some new points into the debate and add new aspects to the already existing knowledge. However, there are some weak points, which shall be described in the following.

The author refers in her basic thesis and her research questions to the European integration, which implies a reference to the European Union and also bases her introduction on processes that clearly concern the EU, as for example “the Schengen zone agreement allowing for free movement of individuals between countries and the common currency of the Euro” (12). However, her researches do include also countries which do not belong to the EU and the author does not provide a basis of her understanding of Europe. Only in the first chapter the

topic is touched, stating that Europe and the European integration do also concern and affect the states which do not belong to the EU, which then provides the justification for the selection of countries in the researches. However, a clear definition of this basic term would set a clear framework for the reader and establish a framework for the research.

Also, there is only a very weak link between the three main chapters of the book, they concern fundamentally different research contexts and differ also in their methodologically aspects. The author establishes only a very weak link though her general research interest. The research interest is however very broad and specified only in the respective research chapters with fundamentally different research questions. Considering the fundamentally different topics of the main chapters, at least a strong and detailed conclusion would be required in order to establish a firm link with the main research topic. The conclusion drawn by the author is however rather general and should be stronger based on the findings which she gained from her researches.

As a last and more specific point, the second research conducted in Ukraine would strongly profit from a more systematic analysis of the data, for example by content analysis of the interviews conducted. As presented in the book, the author just cites single pieces from the interviews and relies on her overall evaluation of them, but did not conduct any systematic analysis to evaluate the data. Such a systematic analysis would be a valuable addition to the research and would provide a possibility to evaluate the data in a better way. Also, it stays unclear at first why Polyakova speaks about mobilization strategies of social movements but then conducts interviews with people that are active in a political party. While her last chapter illustrates her approach towards the interconnections and similarities of movements and parties, the reader is left unclear about this while reading the first two chapters, which might cause confusion.

IV. Conclusion

Each chapter is insightful and interesting in its own way, as the author constantly adds new ideas and perspectives to already existing debates and controversies. The book in general would profit from a clearer definition of the terms European integration, the EU and Europe, which would help to understand the selection of countries for the researches and their basic position within Europe as a political, economic and social space. Also, the 2nd research of the author could be very much enriched by a more systematic analysis of the data gathered. In

general, there is only a very weak link which justifies the compilation of these 3 topics in a book. Readers who are interested in the isolated topics of the single chapters will find interesting and partly also innovative approaches, however, a reader who is reading the book with the expectation to find a stringent thesis and a comprehensive research on how the lagging behind cultural dimension of the European integration is connected with the success of radical right parties might be disappointed. Nevertheless, the book sets the general topic into a new perspective and provides two independent researches as well as a theoretical discussion. It is an interesting contribution for readers which are especially interested in one of the researched contexts or who would like to set facets of the topic and developments within the radical right into new contexts.